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ABSTRACT

To help school administrators, this handbook suggests guidelines for establishing a school public relations (PR) program and offers techniques used by schools to communicate with the community. The introductory section stresses the need for school PR, given recent political, financial, and demographic changes. The second section outlines a master PR plan, comprising a PR committee, a public opinion poll, and staff workshops on PR. The importance of being open with the media is emphasized in the third section, which also presents guidelines on working with reporters and writing news releases. The following section discusses written communications with parents (including single-parent families), conferences, and parent-teacher associations. The fifth section, concerning community elections, touches on ways to win school budget elections and provides ideas for working with the business community, citizen advisory groups, parents, senior citizens, students, and influence groups. Four success stories about school PR are presented in the sixth section, involving public school systems in Dallas (Texas), Utica (Michigan), Fairfax County (Virginia), and Jacksonville (Florida). The subsequent section describes the National School Public Relations Association. The handbook also includes a brief bibliography of school PR resources. (RW)

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School Public Relations: Communicating to the Community

J. A. Kinder

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School Public Relations: Communicating to the Community

By J. A. Kinder

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Introduction

Public relations, a subject that to some carries negative connotations, belongs at the heart of every school system, for the schools that will remain viable in the years ahead are those that are able to communicate, clearly and compellingly, with their patrons. In essence, this is what public relations is all about.

Schools across this nation are reeling as a result of the tremendous upheavals in our society. Public schools can no longer claim a monopoly on education. Private and parochial school systems compete for an ever-dwindling number of students. In point of fact, there are now in 1982 proposals in Congress for tuition tax credits for parents who send their children to private schools. Inflation and other financial woes resulting from the economic recession have taken their toll on schools. Sensationalized, distorted media coverage is a continuing problem for many school districts. To complicate matters further, changing demographics have made the task of communicating with the public more difficult for schools. Less than 15 years ago half the households in America had school-age children. Students formed a natural bridge between school and community. Now, however, only about one-fourth of the households in America have children in school.

It is hardly news that schools today are besieged with problems. The news is that there is something they can do to fight back. Schools that take the ostrich approach to public relations may one day pull their heads out of the sand to discover that their problems have vanished—along with their students. It is time for educators to realize that their livelihoods depend on effective public relations.

Regrettably, too many educators view the subject of public relations

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with a bad taste. They are often uncomfortable about venturing out into the community (or, for that matter, sending messages to the community) to promote their schools and themselves. They firmly believe that if they perform well in the classroom, the public will automatically recognize their value and confer its proper respect. They believe actions speak louder than words. This is a reasonable enough presumption, but experience has shown that we must do more if we are to sell the public on the value of schools.

For one thing, the school community is constantly changing. People are on the move—new students and new teachers are now the rule rather than the exception. Educators must communicate over and over again to the public the good things being accomplished in the schools. As the politician is confronted by people wanting to know what he has done for them lately, so are the schools.

The heart of good public relations for those of us involved in education is performing our jobs in a competent and responsible manner. But we must also make the public aware that we are doing a good job. That is where public relations enters the picture—and effective communications is the primary tool of public relations.

With all the pressures facing school leaders today, they often fail to recognize what an organized public relations program can do for their school districts. And they lack an understanding of how to organize such a program. While skilled in planning new curriculum programs, in developing financial programs, or in conducting a staff development program, they often fail to recognize the crucial role public relations plays in the success of their efforts.

It is true that public relations can be unpredictable and even explosive. When educators go before the public, telling it as it is—the good and the bad, the strengths and the weaknesses—they become vulnerable to criticism. Any time you tell your story to the public some will applaud and others will boo. Nevertheless, communication is an obligation, and it is worth the effort to do it right.

A school is an integral part of the community it serves. Its day-to-day activities are woven into the fabric of community life. The first goal of any public relations program must be to improve the ways in which school personnel communicate with the public. This requires a whole-

hearted commitment to the concept of positive public relations from every member of the school community. The message that schools are people, not just bricks and mortar, must not only be understood but accepted by every school employee.

This fastback presents guidelines for setting up a public relations program and describes proven techniques used by schools to communicate positively with the community.

Developing a Master Public Relations Plan

The great majority of schools today conduct their public relations efforts in hit or miss fashion—if at all. It's a rare school district that has a comprehensive, ongoing public relations plan. Most teachers feel public relations is an administrative function. Most administrators, who already are struggling with burdensome workloads, shy away from developing a program because of the seeming immensity of the task.

In truth, however, schools are constantly communicating with the public, albeit not in the ways their leaders might wish. A rude secretary, an insolent bus driver, a classroom teacher who knocks the local schools at her bridge club—all are sending a message to the public, loud and clear.

Over the course of the past three years, I have developed a public relations plan designed to yield positive results at a cost within the budget of almost any school district. The plan outlined here has built-in flexibility to allow a school district to develop an ongoing public relations program tailor-made to its needs and circumstances. The key, of course, is getting a public relations plan off the drawing board and into practice.

Public relations is a top-level management responsibility. If a plan is to be districtwide, the main impetus must come from the superintendent. If a single building within the system wishes to implement the plan, then the initiative must come from the building principal.

An important first step is for the board of education to give its stamp of approval to the district's PR efforts by adopting a policy statement in support of the plan. Such a statement is itself a good public relations

move, as it is likely to attract media attention. The message should be simple: that the schools are keenly interested in and responsive to public opinion, and that education should be a partnership between school and community.

The PR Committee

A PR Committee is at the heart of a district's public relations program. It acts as a motivator, coordinator, and reporter concerning all PR activities within the district. Its actions and attitudes will in large measure determine the program's success or failure.

Members of this committee should be leaders who can sell the PR program to their colleagues. Each school district will want to establish its own ground rules for membership on the committee; members could be appointed by the superintendent, elected, or selected from volunteers.

A committee of about 12 members is optimum, but a group as large as 25 can still function efficiently. The superintendent chairs the committee, whose membership should be composed of a cross section of the school community. There must be one or more members from each building and from divisions of the central office staff—administrators, secondary teachers, elementary teachers, special services staff, paraprofessionals and classified staff. The impact of the latter group should not be underestimated. Secretaries, bus drivers, cooks, and custodians can make valuable contributions to any PR effort, as they often have more day-to-day contact with the public than the professional staff has.

The Public Opinion Poll

An appropriate first project for the PR Committee is a public opinion survey. This will provide concrete information about how the schools are perceived by the public and what district patrons feel are the schools' main strengths and weaknesses. The poll can be as informal or as sophisticated as the committee wishes to make it. Ideally, the district should undertake a survey that can withstand the most rigorous public scrutiny in terms of sampling, trained interviewers, etc.

Working with an expert in the field of public opinion research, I developed for school districts' use a model telephone poll that includes

information about random sampling, instructions for interviewers, and specific wording of questions. Three methods of obtaining an accurate random sample are covered—voter registration lists, random digit dialing, and random selection of names from the telephone directory.

Phi Delta Kappa disseminates a program that schools can use to conduct opinion polls. Called "Polling Attitudes of Community on Education" (PACE), the program was developed with the cooperation of Dr. George Gallup, the well-known pollster. The program includes all the materials needed to conduct local opinion polls about the schools. Further information about the PACE program is available by writing to Phi Delta Kappa, Box 789, Bloomington, Indiana 47402.

Even informal surveys can yield useful information about the schools. For example, the PR Committee could declare a two-week listening period. During this time, the staff would make note of all communications regarding schools, including written communications from patrons, phone calls, items in the media, and conversations with members of the community. At the end of the two weeks, staff members share their findings, at which time a rough picture of public opinion regarding schools should begin to emerge. Admittedly, an exercise such as this cannot stand as a foolproof measure of public opinion, but for a district lacking either the desire or resources to conduct a more thorough poll, it will give the PR Committee a start for organizing its efforts.

It is a good idea to conduct a follow-up poll about a year after the original survey. This will allow the committee to judge whether its PR efforts are having any appreciable impact on the community and to make any needed adjustments in the PR program.

Involvement Through Staff Workshops

The foundation of any successful PR program is active commitment, beginning at the top levels of the school administration and filtering throughout the entire staff. To secure this commitment from the total staff, a workshop should be held to convince each staff member of the need for an effective, ongoing public relations program.

Staff must be made aware that they are all key persons when it comes

to communicating effectively with the public. The rationale for such workshops is simple: the health of the entire school system is at stake.

The first item of business at the workshop might be announcing the results of the public opinion survey conducted by the PR Committee. These findings will serve as the foundation for developing a comprehensive public relations program for the district. It is a good idea to announce poll results to the media, too. If poll results have been positive, media coverage will help to reinforce and consolidate the good feelings the public has about schools. If results have been less than favorable, the PR Committee can use the news release to note what corrective actions will be taken.

The main business of the workshop is accomplished in small groups, with a member of the PR Committee chairing each group. Participants should attempt to identify the various "publics" within the school district and suggest ideas for improved communications with each group. Using this information, the group leader develops a summary report, which is later shared with the PR Committee.

Developing a Comprehensive PR Plan

With the results of its public opinion survey, along with the summary reports from the staff workshops, the PR Committee has a basis for developing a comprehensive PR program. In developing this plan the committee should organize ideas into three categories—those that will enhance communications districtwide, those that could be put into practice at the building level, and those that require individual initiative.

The time to launch a PR program is *not* during a crisis. School administrators who expect a PR plan to bail them out of serious trouble will be disappointed. Any PR program should be a long-term effort designed to prevent problems, not solve them. A well-planned PR program gives the district an alternative to the "crisis management" approach to dealing with the public.

Working with the Media

Ask newspeople what they feel is their major purpose and they'll most often respond, "To serve the community." Ask educators how they view their role and the response will be similar. Despite this commonality of purpose, I have always been amazed by the amount of animosity that exists between the two groups.

Ask either group to evaluate its public image and they will tell you that they feel the ills of society have unfairly been laid at their doorsteps. Both the press and the schools have at various times been charged with spawning everything from violence and illiteracy to drug abuse and the new morality. Both groups argue vigorously that they mirror society's ills rather than create them, but such arguments are largely ignored by a skeptical public looking for a scapegoat.

Interestingly, the professional preparation of reporters and classroom teachers is quite similar, and they both share the same complaint about low pay scales. Yet in most communities the professional respect that could cement the relationship between education and the media is sadly lacking, lost through years of mistrust and mutual defensiveness.

The litany of charges and countercharges has become almost a cliché. "The media cover only negative news about schools," charge the educators. "Schools are only interested in a whitewash of their problems," respond the media. There is a kernel of truth in both statements. Newspapers are in the business of news, and stories about drug raids in schools make news and sell more papers than stories about outstanding science fairs. On the other hand, when school boards hire a media director, they are often hoping for just that—someone to direct (i.e., control) the media.

The long-standing antagonism between the news media and educators may never be laid to rest completely. After all, educators need a public watchdog, need to be held accountable. And the media need to be called to task when incorrect or incomplete information has been printed; they need to know all sides of the story. When the smoke clears, however, the fact remains that both the media and the schools are communicators. By laying aside their suspicions and exercising some understanding of each other's problems and priorities, they can help each other perform their jobs more effectively.

So how do we as educators begin to set right our relationship with the journalistic community? As in most difficult undertakings, the first step is the hardest. This means switching off our natural defense mechanism; it means resisting the temptation to keep the lid on bad news; it means adopting a policy of total openness. Experience has shown that the ultimate result of such a policy will not be a barrage of negative news coverage. Quite the opposite. When journalists feel they're getting the straight story from the schools, a more balanced coverage seems to prevail.

Of course, the local paper will still give banner headlines to the drug raid. But maybe the story will give more emphasis to the underlying reasons behind student drug use and the steps the schools are taking to combat the problem. Rest assured, the paper will carry the story with or without your cooperation. It only stands to reason that you will have a better shot at getting the things you want the public to know in print if you are a cooperative news source. Who knows, maybe next week the annual science fair may even find its way into the paper as a feature story, complete with pictures.

The next important step in improving relations with the press is to develop some one-to-one relationships with media contacts. Get to know, on a first-name basis, the reporters who cover school news. Recognize the demands placed on the reporter and then help yourself by helping him do a better job. Like teachers, reporters don't have enough hours in the day. For most of them, the day-to-day grind means being assigned to a story or developing a story idea, becoming an instant expert on the topic, and then getting the story written before the deadline. The time to give a story the treatment it deserves is a luxury reporters

seldom enjoy. With this in mind, it is clearly in your own interest to give the reporter all the help you can. Here are some general guidelines:

• Professional respect should prevail. Most reporters have had four years of college training, plus an internship to boot. They deserve to be treated with respect. That means keeping appointments, returning phone calls promptly, and letting the reporter know immediately if there has been a change of plans.

• Do your homework. The reporter isn't the only one who should prepare for an interview. Don't waste valuable interview time rummaging through your files looking for a document. Have materials at hand and organized before the reporter arrives.

• Strike "no comment" from your vocabulary. If you don't feel sufficiently prepared to answer a question, say you don't know the answer but that you will get back to the reporter before deadline—then keep your word. School personnel who are always conveniently absent when a reporter calls create the appearance that they have something to hide. Worse yet, the reporter may become angry enough to comment in print that local school officials are spending extraordinary amounts of time away from their desks.

• When you make a mistake, admit it. But quickly follow up with a statement of what is being done to correct the error.

• Avoid "educationese." A comment like "The kids are learning more" means a lot more to reporters and parents than "The program effectively meets the educational needs of the children." When technical language cannot be avoided, be sure all terms are clearly defined and understood.

• Work at developing a news sense for story ideas and picture possibilities. The press is always interested in hard news—test scores, awards, school board decisions. But reporters also are on the lookout for good feature stories—an out-of-the-ordinary class project or field trip, a faculty member with an unusual talent or hobby, the senior who is graduating with a perfect attendance record, the grandmother who is returning to night school. If you have done a good job in establishing media contacts, you will be able to pick up the phone to mention a feature possibility to a reporter. Chances are he or she will welcome an opportunity to give some human-interest appeal to school news.

• Learn the deadlines of each media outlet you deal with; then time your calls and news releases accordingly.

The News Release

A news release is the accepted form for conveying general information to the media. News releases can provide information plus interpretive background regarding such things as test scores and budgetary matters. They also are welcomed by the media for public service announcements such as registration dates and bus schedules.

In general, the drama of a press conference should be reserved for truly dramatic occasions. If you have an earth-shaking announcement or feel compelled to give an in-depth explanation of the stand your district is taking on a hotly-debated issue, a press conference may be in order. Otherwise, a simple, well-written news release will suffice. Keep in mind, though, that there may be times when a news release will simply get lost in the shuffle. If you have a slightly offbeat idea for a feature story, your best bet may be to pick up the telephone and speak personally with a reporter with whom you have a good working relationship.

A good news release is timely, relevant, objective, brief and, above all, accurate. Like it or not, your news release will be seen by the media as a reflection of the professional competence of the entire education community. There is no worse PR for your school than a news release that is littered with misspelled words, poor grammar, and sloppy reporting of the facts. Every news release should be checked and double-checked for accuracy.

Here are some general guidelines for writing news releases:

• Type your release, double-spaced, on standard 8½" x 11" paper, one side only. The source of the release, along with an address and telephone number, should appear at the top of the page. Also include the name and phone number of a spokesperson reporters can call for additional information.

• Use the inverted pyramid style of writing. Put the most important information first, followed by supplementary facts and background information. That way, if the article has to be shortened, vital information is less likely to be omitted. Follow standard newswriting style. Tell

who, what, when, where, why, and how when writing the lead paragraphs of your news release. If you are uncertain of what that entails, study the organization of news stories in the paper as a guide. You also may want to purchase a copy of *The Associated Press Stylebook and Libel Manual*, the sourcebook used by most newspapers.

- Report the facts objectively without editorial comment. Keep the tone of your news release friendly and factual.
- Play fair. Distribute your news release to all media outlets in your area, regardless of their past track record in reporting school news.
- Radio and television broadcasts deal in seconds. In-depth explanations may be worthwhile in a news release directed at the print media, but generally cannot be used by radio and television stations because of time restrictions. When sending a news release to radio and TV stations, condense the comments to the whys and wherefores of the lead. If you feel more extensive broadcast coverage is needed, contact the station manager about such ideas as having a school district spokesperson on a talk show or live coverage of school board meetings.
- Stale news is no news. Practice next-day reporting of events, not "as soon as I get time." Announcements concerning upcoming events should be made no later than two days before the event, but no sooner than two weeks ahead of time. A news release that arrives too early is almost as likely to be ignored as one that arrives too late.

Other Good Ideas for Working with the Media

- Host a press preview at the beginning of the school year. Invite the media people who cover your district in for coffee and a quick look at what is new—new people, new programs, new policies.
- If a film crew is coming to your school, have a custodian on hand to help find power outlets and fuse boxes for equipment setup.
- Provide each of your media contacts with a typed card listing the name, title, and phone number of persons authorized to speak on behalf of the school district.
- Approach a local paper with ideas for an "Ask the Teacher" column.
- Tell the truth. Always.

Working with Parents

Times have changed, and so must American education. Public schools exist to serve the community—that was the guiding principle under which our public school system came into being over a century ago. The principle may still hold true, but somewhere along the way we seem to have missed a crucial connection—our delivery system leaves something to be desired.

Education critics say schools today are an anachronism. They maintain that we are offering horse and buggy education to the American family of the 1980s. The entire structure of our school system is modeled around a rural, agrarian society that no longer exists. For example, we don't hold school during the summer because at one time children were needed at home to help in the fields. School doesn't begin until 8:30, ostensibly so students will have time to help with milking and other chores before school. School is dismissed at 3:30 so there will be enough daylight for students to help with chores after school.

Educators face a new set of realities today—working mothers, a soaring divorce rate, and the resultant single-parent families. How many of our students return home to an empty house every afternoon because mom and dad are both still on the job? How many of our students are shuttled between home, school, and a child-care provider because school hours are at odds with the hours of the workplace? The reality of today is families with both parents in the work force. Yet, in most instances, schools continue to operate on the assumption that mom is still there at home.

The reality of today is that divorce touches nearly half of all American households. Yet results of a nationwide poll by the National Com-

mittee for Citizens in Education showed that the majority of single parents feel schools are unresponsive to their needs. Respondents cited such concerns as having to take time off from their jobs for parent-teacher conferences. They noted that schools fail to inform noncustody parents of school activities or send them report cards. They took issue with their children's textbooks that made no reference to any lifestyle other than the traditional nuclear family, and they were resentful of school personnel who used terms such as "broken homes."

Today's parents want help. Many of them are saying, "When my child is six weeks of age, I will hand over a large part of the responsibility for his care to someone else." Today's parents need child care—sometimes from 7 in the morning to 6 in the evening. They want programs for their children on Saturdays. They want structured programs and activities during the summer.

The question now before us is this: Will we in public education meet these needs, or will we leave the job to the private sector? Society has made its needs clear. What remains to be seen is whether educators will begin the painful process of change to meet those needs, or if we will continue to operate our schools in the tradition of another era.

It is my firm belief that the future of American education hinges on this question. It is imperative that we work to meet the needs of our changing society. Let's once and for all abandon the notion that public education is somehow above the pressures and demands placed on the rest of society. We sell a product—education. Our customers are the parents and taxpayers of America. When a competitor steps on the scene who can deliver the product better than we can, rest assured our customers will take their business elsewhere.

With these thoughts in mind, let's move on to some specifics for strengthening that all-important link between home and school.

Written Communications

Be it a professionally-prepared newsletter or a handwritten note from the teacher, the written word is one of the key links between educator and parent. There is a great temptation for educators to impress laymen with "educationese." Avoid it. A straightforward message, written in everyday language will be appreciated by parents—and cer-

tainly better understood. Saying that a child is a "marginal underachiever" may sound professional, but if you say a child is "a little slow" the parents will know what you mean.

A regularly-published school newsletter is the backbone of most school districts' communications programs. A newsletter is the one opportunity a school has to tell its story positively, in its own words. Unfortunately, many schools have abused this privilege to the point of publishing little more than propaganda sheets.

Speak well of yourself; just make sure it is news and not puffery. Fill your newsletter with news about the school—and that means what students are doing and why. Parents are interested in promotions and awards, but they are more interested in the latest happenings in the classroom. An effective newsletter contains information parents want to know, not just what administrators want to say.

Your budget will dictate a number of decisions regarding production of your newsletter. Distribution should be as wide as possible, ideally to every patron in the district. But if funds are limited, you may have to settle for sending the newsletter only to parents. Mail it if you can; delivery by students is hit-or-miss at best.

Informal communications from teachers or administrators are greatly valued by parents. One good idea is the "Happy Gram." We are quick to inform parents if a child steps out of line. But how often do we let parents know when the child is performing well in school? Send a "Happy Gram" to parents (and maybe even grandparents) when a child masters a skill, scores well on a test, or does a good deed.

Even report cards can serve as vehicles for improving home-school relations. A brief note regarding a student's performance, including problem areas and suggestions for improvement, means a lot to parents.

Parent Conferences

A source of great anxiety for many parents and many teachers, the parent-teacher conference has enormous potential as a public relations tool. One crucial, but often overlooked, point is that conferences work best as two-way exchanges. A successful conference should be as informative for the teacher as for the parent. The teacher who approaches

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conferences with this attitude not only puts parents at ease but gleans useful information for working more effectively with individual students.

Preparation is the key to a productive conference. Beforehand, teachers should gather all pertinent records and papers, jot down specific points they want to discuss, and have ready some suggestions for how parents can help their child at home. (See Fastback 132 *How Parent-Teacher Conferences Build Partnerships*.)

Parents should be urged, via the school newsletter and personal contacts, to prepare for the conference by making a list of things they would like to discuss. They might want to ask the child for input when preparing this list. If at all possible, both parents should attend the conference.

Conferences should be scheduled before or after work in order to accommodate the growing number of families with both parents in the work force and to encourage fathers to attend. As a further aid to parents, many schools now provide babysitting services during conference hours.

Parent-Teacher Organizations

Parents are busy people. Getting them involved in school-related organizations takes some doing, but the rewards are substantial. A parent-teacher organization that functions smoothly and effectively is an invaluable ally for any school district trying to improve its home-school communications network.

If your district's PTA organization has become a little creaky, here are some suggestions for rejuvenation.

- Set a goal of one school improvement project per year, then pick projects that require more manpower than money.
- Try to stir up some interest in PTA officer elections. If you have one or two officers who have been entrenched for years, suggest (tactfully) that the number of terms in office be limited.
- Widen the organization's scope through participation in neighborhood or districtwide events, such as parades or holiday projects.
- Don't overlook leaders of the parent-teacher organization when planning school awards assemblies.

Other Good Ideas for Communicating with Parents

- Set up a welcome wagon from your school. Use retired teachers, parents, and students as your school's ambassadors.
- Invite groups of parents to early-morning breakfast at your school. Find out their concerns and ask for suggestions about improving the school.
- Distribute facts sheets about local schools to new residents of the community.
- Encourage teachers to keep in touch with parents by phone. Parents appreciate a personal invitation to a school function or inquiries about a sick child.
- Supply elementary teachers with special envelopes for sending home teeth if they should come out at school. These are tender moments parents don't want to miss.

Working with the Community at the Polls

Schools have an unfortunate tendency to fly by the seat of their pants when budget time rolls around and the community goes to the polls to pass or reject what the school board has proposed. One explanation for this is that there has been very little research for schools to rely on relative to conducting successful budget campaigns. All this changed with the publication of a kit in 1981 by the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA) called *You Can Win at the Polls*. The material in the kit is organized into 10 basic steps, based on studies of 50 successful school elections around the nation between 1975-80. This material provides a much-needed guide for organizing and conducting school budget elections.

NSPRA research shows that today in most school districts decisions are made by voters who have no children in public schools. Elections are no longer won or lost with the votes of parents. Decisions now rest with a new and growing majority: nonparents. The 1982 Gallup Poll of the public's attitudes toward the public schools reflected this change. The sample drawn for the survey was composed of: 65%, no children in schools; 31%, public school parents; and 6%, parochial school parents.

The foundation of almost every successful school election campaign studied by NSPRA was an ongoing, well-developed, and organized year-round public relations program. In a few cases, election campaigns were successful without such a PR program, but these campaigns usually resulted in the subsequent establishment of an ongoing PR program.

It has been demonstrated that the success or failure of school finance

campaigns is often determined before the announcement of the election is made. Voters cast their ballots according to their attitudes toward schools. They are also greatly influenced by their friends. These attitudes are a by-product of the experiences they may have had with school personnel and students, or even stories they have heard from sources they trust. Voters tend to fall into three main categories: those with moderate to strong positive attitudes toward their schools, those who are on the fence, and a smaller group made up of those with moderate to strong negative school attitudes. The latter group is important because their attitudes have taken years to form and will not easily be changed. The task is to neutralize the negative effort of these potential "no" voters.

The 10 steps successful school-budget elections have in common, as outlined by NSPRA, are:

1. Develop a strong public relations program.
2. Preplanning—study, analyze and develop a time-line chart.
3. Study the historical data.
4. Survey your community.
5. Develop election campaign strategy.
6. Conduct special voter registration.
7. Develop election materials, tools, and techniques.
8. Identify your "yes" vote and plurality needed to win.
9. Election day activities.
10. Debriefing/Evaluation.

Good Ideas for Working with the Community

The business community—The major employers are important to the schools in any community and deserve regular communications from the schools. They can be a reliable resource in setting up all types of programs. The chamber of commerce is also an important source of information for the schools about community needs.

Citizen advisory groups—Evaluation of community needs is a good job for a citizen advisory group to tackle. In selecting an advisory group, keep in mind the diversity of the community and the need for broad representation. The group should have a definite charge, and when that mission is accomplished, it should be disbanded. A coordi-

nator from the district's professional staff should be appointed to work with the group.

Education fairs—There are two excellent reasons for sponsoring such events. First, they provide recognition for students. Second, they get the public into the schools. A good fair has plenty of advance publicity and it is well organized. The same goes for open houses.

Parents—The needs of parents are varied, but one group that comes immediately to mind is parents new to the community. Extra attention by the school staff to these patrons can pay great dividends. New parents are often anxious and greatly appreciate a friendly hand. The building principal and classroom teacher, with a bit of planning, can turn this potentially negative experience into a pleasant one. The more concern evidenced by the school staff, the better the public relations effect will be.

Grandparents—This group is keenly interested in schools, but often ignored by educators. Grandparents can become one of your closest allies. One idea is a special day just for grandparents, to give them an opportunity to become better acquainted with the school program by actually seeing it firsthand. Another idea is the "Happy Gram." Grandparents deserve to know what's going on—especially if the news is good.

Senior citizens—Free passes to school events for senior citizens help to get them into the schools and show them that the schools care.

Students—It is altogether fitting that students should be included in the public relations process. A few minutes with students at the end of the day (especially at the elementary level) reviewing what they learned in school that day is time well spent. Remember, "What did you learn in school today?" is the stock question most parents ask their children.

Influence groups—There are certain places in any school district where a good deal of conversation takes place about almost everything, including the schools—barber shops, beauty shops, bars, and real estate offices. Make sure the people who run these businesses are well informed by providing them with newsletters and other publications about the schools.

Knowing your community—It is imperative that school staff at all

levels know their community. This can be accomplished in a number of ways—through parent conferences, by studying student needs, by paying attention to notes from parents and by taking note of what the media have to say. Also, educators need to participate in community activities and to get to know the people they serve. Public opinion polls can be worthwhile and need to be considered on a regular, planned basis.

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Success Stories

This chapter contains a description of four successful school public relations programs. While many others could be cited, these four are representative of the kinds of practices discussed earlier in this fastback.

Dallas, Texas

Texans like to do things in a big way, and the Dallas school public relations program runs true to form. With a full-time staff of about 75 and a whopping multimillion dollar budget, the Dallas program is one of the biggest and best in the nation. The overall goal of the Dallas public relations effort is to maintain an ongoing, comprehensive program of internal and external communications. Dallas uses a corporate approach in its overall public relations effort. The program is planned and implemented through a Division of Communications, which is headed by an associate superintendent, who serves in the general superintendent's cabinet.

Day-to-day activities are managed through four departments: *Employee Relations*, 10 staff members responsible for involving and informing all employees; *Community Relations*, 27 staff members responsible for involving and informing citizens; *Information Services*, 7 staff members responsible for news media relations, publications, broadcasting activities and technical support of the other departments; and *Graphics*, 50 staff members responsible for the annual production of $3 million in printed materials.

In addition, the Office of the Associate Superintendent (4 staff members) provides special communications management services to the general superintendent and board of education, including counsel, regular feedback, and speech writing services.

The 1980-81 program was supported by $1.5 million in local funds and some $1 million in outside monies. It operates under the authority of comprehensive board policies and procedures that spell out public relations responsibilities for other school staff and programs. For example, each school is required to develop a communications plan, which includes a faculty-staff advisory committee and a community advisory committee. To assist other employees with their public relations duties, the communications staff frequently conducts training sessions, provides technical assistance, and continuously sends out PR ideas and tips.

Specific activities used in the Dallas PR program include:

Employee Relations:

- An ombudsman program to help employees "broker" the system
- Operation Involvement, a shared decision-making program for district staff
- Monthly written feedback to employees on their questions
- Monthly rap sessions for employees with the general superintendent
- A variety of other activities, including regular interaction and consultation with employee organizations, governmental relations, and legislative liaison services

Community Relations:

- An award-winning adopt-a-school program
- A nationally acclaimed volunteer program
- The Community Network for Public Education, a citizen advocacy group for schools
- Community specialists, a team of 24 professionals assisting local schools in the desegregation effort
- A senior citizens action program
- Partners in Learning, a community-supported effort to involve parents in the learning process
- School Action Center, a daily hotline service featuring four staff members who help citizens "broker" the district

• Business/education relations, through a special contractual arrangement with the Dallas Chamber of Commerce

• A variety of other activities including an inner-city storefront operation for parent involvement, an annual "information weekend" at 75 community sites, and the hosting of thousands of visitors to the district

Information Services:

• Internal publications

• External publications

• News media relations

• A network of communications contacts at each school

• "Discusiones Escolares," a weekly Spanish radio program

• A special project to increase attendance, including work with a minority PR consultant

• A campaign to help district efforts to eliminate social promotion

• A variety of other activities ranging from audiovisual to layout, design, and editing services

The *Graphics Department* plays a vital role in the overall public relations effort by producing quality printed material for all departments and by insuring their timely delivery.

In addition to overall management and decision-making duties, the associate superintendent's office provides a daily feedback report for the general superintendent as well as research and speech writing services. Division staff also serve as district contacts with a number of state and local agencies and organizations, including membership on at least a dozen boards of directors.

The Dallas communications staff attempts to assess the district's PR program regularly through a planning and goal-setting process, as well as through surveys of the public it tries to serve. More importantly, staff and a board subcommittee continually monitor and modify the communications program throughout the year, rather than waiting for a survey of public opinion (which is done every other year).

Indicators of the program's success include:

• Massive community support, as evidenced by 956 adopting groups serving 132 schools; 6,514 volunteers reporting 239,151 hours;

and several million dollars in contributions

• Designation by the Texas Education Agency as a "Demonstration Program in School Communications" following an on-site review of the Communications Division

• A favorable citing by the U.S. General Accounting Office following an in-depth study of the district's programs

• High marks from the state accreditation team, which conducts campus-by-campus review of the district every five years

• A 2% increase in school attendance

• A continuing increase in achievement scores

• Participation of nearly 50,000 parents in teacher conferences

• A number of award-winning publications and AV productions and high ratings for a variety of involvement activities
ticipants

Utica, Michigan

Two words, *ongoing* and *comprehensive*, best describe the PR program of the Utica Community Schools, a 28,200-student district near Detroit. The program operates on the four cornerstones of professional public relations: research, planning, execution, and evaluation. The school district's public relations staff includes one full-time and one half-time professional, a secretary, and 2,800 full- and part-time employees.

Highlights of its program include:

• At an annual community meeting attended by 800 local leaders, a survey of those attending showed that 96% gave the schools an *A* or *B* rating. The survey also requested ideas for improvement.

• Sixty-seven percent of a scientifically-selected random sample of 10,000 residents gave the Utica schools an *A* or *B* as an overall grade. This compares with 35% nationally in the 1980 Gallup Poll. In the same local poll, 48% of the respondents rated schools "better" than when they went to school. The local polling system is 10 years old.

• More than 500 positive education articles appeared in local newspapers in 1980, thanks largely to the district's "Getting Out The Good News" system, which relies heavily on teachers using news tip forms to alert reporters to possible articles.

• A 10-year renewal of the tax millage rate was approved by a 77% voter margin in 1979.

• Six hundred persons attended a celebrity-appearance Volunteers Tea in 1980.

• The district prints a weekly *Staff News*, a *Board Briefs* the evening of each meeting, and a community newsletter, *Forward Steps*, which supplements excellent local media coverage.

The district has embarked on a program to halt local enrollment loss to private and parochial schools. Aspects of the campaign include:

• An Open Real Estate Conference for local realtors to help them explain programs and answer questions of prospective home-buying parents. A revised handout that replies to national and local concerns of potential private school parents (discipline policies, test results, parent input, etc.) was distributed. Copies were sent to all real estate firms that did not attend.

• Many new efforts were made to get parents of preschoolers into schools, including a bulk-mailing of a new preschool brochure and a superintendent's letter to parents of all district three- and four-year-olds. The parents were also placed on their area elementary school's newsletter distribution list. At each initial preschool class a parent orientation was conducted that featured a slide show presentation designed to deal with public school concerns expressed in national and local polls.

• A structured kindergarten recruitment effort was staged. It included mailing a set of four brochures on the elementary curriculum to all prospective kindergarten parents, a complete kindergarten open house outline for principals to follow, post-open house school tours, a follow-up process for no-shows, and two evaluation instruments.

When faced with the need for a series of major boundary changes—including the first-ever merger of two schools—the district implemented the following four-step plan: 1) a districtwide Enrollment Implications Committee was established to work with the administration on all planning, 2) numerous public hearings were held to review the proposals, 3) the superintendent had personal communication with all affected staffs, and 4) newsletters and "hotlines" explaining all

aspects of the boundary changes were distributed to parents frequently. As a result of these efforts, every change proposed by the Board of Education was accepted without citizen objection.

To secure input from the community on changing needs and concerns, the school district did the following:

- The school board accepted with gratitude a 216-page citizens' advisory committee report on "Meeting the Challenges of the 1980s." It contained more than 100 suggestions on 17 topics.
- Two Project HEAR (Householder Educational Attitude Reaction) surveys were conducted. A survey of Title I parents used a mailing-telephone interviewing system with a 75% response rate. The other was a random sample community poll that included some questions from the national Gallup Poll, others from a countywide educational survey, and some on local issues.

To improve parent communication, the school district did the following:

- With the cooperation of teachers, K-12 parent conferences were held in all 39 schools.
- The district's first all-parent junior high school survey was conducted as well as two elementary school parent surveys.

Fairfax, Virginia

The Office of Community Relations of the Fairfax County Public Schools publishes a long list of items to provide information about the school system to both internal and external audiences. The district maintains a mailing list of news media persons, heads of organizations, and other persons who request to be included on the list.

The regular publications of the Fairfax County schools include:

- *Supergram*, a weekly newsletter to all employees
- *Bulletin*, a professional staff magazine published six times each school year
- *Familygram*, a newsletter for parents distributed through schools four times each school year with occasional additional issues on special subjects
- School board agendas, published and distributed the week prior to meetings

- School board summaries, published and distributed the day following meetings
- School system telephone directory, published annually
- "Information for Parents," a brochure distributed through schools, realtors, and Welcome Wagons
- "Meet the Fairfax County School Board," a brochure available for the community at school board meetings
- "Board Briefs," weekly newsletter for board and key staff
- Monthly calendar of events, compiled and published for internal and external publics

The public relations staff maintains close personal daily contact with news media persons. Other media-related activities include:

- Special orientation for new press persons
- News releases about schools on a systemwide basis
- News conferences on subjects of media interest
- "Media Tips," published biweekly
- Memorandums to news media on events of interest
- Public service announcements for radio and TV stations
- Taped 15-minute radio program about school system
- Board backup packets for press regulars who cover meetings
- Information, including photos and captions, provided on request to media persons
- Interviews with board and key staff members arranged
- News clipping service for board and key staff
- Pictures, captions, and articles provided to county and other publications
- Cooperation with educational organizations to produce national public service announcements

The public relations staff provides a variety of support services to central office personnel and local schools. They include:

- Network of news liaisons at district-level departments and local schools
- Coverage of local school events arranged through media and handled directly
- Photography and picture printing provided for local school internal and external use

- Assistance and advice provided for publications originating in central offices, schools, PTAs, etc.
- Sponsors annual school publications contest
- Editing service for central staffs and occasionally for schools
- Media assistance to schools
- Guidance and assistance to principals for regular programs and crisis situations
- Support provided for staff planning, writing of articles on educational subjects, including writing, editing, illustrating, and marketing
- Annual journalism workshop for intermediate and high school student reporters
- News releases sent to student newspaper editors; student reporters invited to all news conferences
- Assistance provided in recruiting employees, volunteers, etc.
- Notification phoned to news media of schedule changes

A variety of PR activities of the Fairfax County schools include:

- Monthly meetings with superintendent and advisory councils representing all categories of employees with minutes distributed to each work location
- Bimonthly meetings with superintendent and Planning Council, composed of representatives of major citizen organizations
- Regular meetings with superintendent and countywide Student Advisory Council
- Liaison maintained with community organizations—Office of Community Relations represented on PTA County Council executive board; semiannual "school-community nights" conducted in conjunction with council
- Communication maintained with organizations (e.g., universities, businesses)
- "Family of publications," packets of sample publications, provided as needed
- Speakers bureau provided
- Fifteen-minute slide tape presentation, "Public Education: Something for Everyone," prepared for use with community groups
- "General Information" provided to public by telephone

• School news and daily lunch menus taped on community "call phone"

• Congratulatory letters to staff and students for noteworthy achievements

• Tours of central administration building conducted

• Visitations of school system arranged on request

• Student awards ceremonies planned and conducted for school board, with photos provided to media and participants

Jacksonville, Florida

In Jacksonville the public had lost confidence in its schools. They had good reason. In 1964, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools failed to accredit the city's high schools. There was shock. There was outrage. And there was also the movement of more and more Duval County parents toward alternative means of education for their children.

It took seven years to get all the high schools reaccredited, and even then major problems of public confidence remained. Finally, in 1976, things started to turn around. A new superintendent announced his goal to get every school in the system accredited. Thus, staff, students, parents and the business community, uniting under such slogans as "Education is a Family Affair," and "Students Will Rise to the Level of Expectancy," embarked on a goal of full accreditation.

In 1979 they made it, and now boast the largest fully accredited school system in the country. It was a gimmick, of sorts—accrediting elementary schools—but it worked, and it triggered a revolution in the Duval County Public Schools.

Among the other aspects of a massive campaign to restore confidence to the Jacksonville schools were:

• *Parental Involvement.* In 1979, more than 60,000 parents in the 102,000 pupil school system attended fall open house, setting an all-time record for the event. The record lasted only a year. In 1980, the number jumped to 71,600.

• *Academic Competition.* Academic coaches were recognized and were paid as much as athletic coaches, and a weekly, televised "Brain Brawl" match is held between high school academic teams. At the end

of the year, the winning team gets a trophy and a check for $1,000 from a local business firm. The competition features cheerleaders and pep rallies, just like athletic events. And in the spring of 1981, Jacksonville hosted the first annual "Academic Super Bowl," held, naturally, in a football stadium.

• *Discipline.* New standards of student conduct were implemented, including automatic expulsion for violence against persons and for drug or alcohol use or sale. Expelled students are given the choice of working their way back into regular schools by attendance at alternative schools. All but a handful choose that option. The rest are expelled for the remainder of the year in which the infraction occurs and for the following year. There is also a dress code and a no-smoking policy.

• *Attendance.* A strict attendance policy mandates suspension for students who miss more than nine days of class in a grading period.

• *"Testing Fever."* Emphasis was placed on *excellence in testing results.* As a result, in three years the percentage of Jacksonville students passing State Student Assessment Tests has risen from 55% to 77% in math and from 86% to 98% in communications. Student test scores on the Scholastic Aptitude Test have increased for four consecutive years, while the national scores have continued to slide; and Jacksonville students now score above regional, state, and national averages. Likewise, with nationally standardized basic skill achievement tests, students in Jacksonville have risen above national averages, and their average scores are among the highest for the nation's urban schools.

• *Business Support.* Thirty-one business firms have assumed a partnership with individual schools, generating new respect on the part of the business community for the quality of education in Jacksonville.

The result of all these efforts has been a sharp increase in public confidence in the city's schools. An extensive survey of parents conducted by the *Florida Times-Union* newspaper showed that nearly three-fourths of the parents rated the schools good or excellent; and another study, commissioned by the chamber of commerce, cited the growing reputation of the public schools as a major factor in attracting business to Jacksonville.

National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA)

Educators interested in more resources on school public relations should become familiar with the publications and services of the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA), which was founded in 1935 to help bring about better citizen understanding of the objectives, accomplishments and needs of the nation's schools. From its inception, NSPRA perceived its prime function as one of training educators and education leaders to become more sensitive and skilled in their dealings with parents and the community.

Early publications stressed "how-to" techniques such as press relations, printing and layout tips, running finance campaigns and conducting parent-teacher conferences. More recently, as education has grown more complex—and more controversial—NSPRA has moved to help education's decision makers build public confidence in our schools through more sophisticated policy and action.

In 1958, *Education U.S.A.*, a weekly, fast-mail newsletter was inaugurated to brief education leaders on major developments nationwide. An offshoot in the mid-1960s was the *Education U.S.A. "Special Report,"* an in-depth study on a single topic. In 1981 the association inaugurated education's first daily electronic news service, the *Education U.S.A. Newsline*, using a computer network to provide up-to-the-minute news at electronic speed.

In 1954 the association began a series of annual national Public Relations Seminars to introduce neophytes to the basics of educational communication and public relations and to provide professional development opportunities for veteran PR persons to keep them up-to-date on new technologies and developments. Approximately 500 full-

and part-time PR specialists take part in each of the seminars held in various parts of the nation.

During the past several years the association has conducted hundreds of staff development and inservice training workshops in 35 states, Canada, and for the United States Dependents Schools in Europe. These workshops have provided communication training for over 20,000 central office administrators, school board members, principals, parents, teachers, students, and members of support staffs, as well as non-parent community members.

Since 1976 NSPRA has sponsored the *Annual School and College Publications Contest* to identify and recognize outstanding school and college publications and public service announcements. In 1981 there were more than 1,300 entries in this annual contest.

In 1981 the *NSPRA Gold Medallion Awards* competition was announced. The competition was established to recognize outstanding, planned, educational public relations programs.

The address of NSPRA is:

1801 N. Moore Street
Arlington, VA 22209

Conclusion

Basic ingredients for those in education who embark on a planned program of public relations are wholehearted commitment to the schools, sensitivity to the needs of the community, and carefully planned two-way communication.

We must all give careful thought to how we as individuals can do our part. Public relations—doing a good job and then telling the school story—is the business of every school employee.

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